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FM AMEMBASSY NIAMEY
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 5230
INFO RUEHZK/ECOWAS COLLECTIVE
RHMFISS/HQ USAFRICOM STUTTGART GE
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 NIAMEY 000567

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SUBJECT: Police Detain Journalists in Referendum Run Up

Ref: a) Niamey 00557, b) Niamey 00493, c) Niamey 00507, d) Niamey 00515

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¶1. Summary: Police summoned eight independent media editors for questioning on August 1, ahead of the August 4 constitutional referendum, and two remain in custody. The police accused them of defaming the son of President Tandja by publishing reports that he received millions in kickbacks for his role in setting up a uranium mining deal. The two journalists still in detention are also accused of libel for investigating corruption charges involving the Minister of Justice and President of the National Commission for Human Rights and Fundamental Liberties (CNDLF). Dounia Media Group again finds itself under government scrutiny for its role in airing opposition statements. The latest efforts to muzzle the independent media on the eve of the referendum may have led to a marginally more cautious tone, but the independent media remains vocal in its commitment to the principles of press freedom. End summary.

Police Summon Eight Editors for Questioning

¶2. Police summoned eight editors of independent local media organizations for questioning on August 1, just three days before the constitutional referendum to extend and expand the mandate of President Tandja. Police questioned the eight journalists (which included Moussa Aksar of L'Evenement, Ibrahim Souley of L'Enqueteur, Oumarou Keita of the biweekly Le Republicain, Zakari Alzouma of Opinions, Abard Mouddour Zakara of L'Actualite, and Assane Sadou of Democrate) on reports published last week implicating the son of President Tandja in a deal alleged to have netted him millions of dollars in kickbacks for brokering a uranium mining contract. Included in the reports was a leaked contract which specified that that the President's son was to share 5 million USD in proceeds with Ibrahim Hamidou, Director of the Multimedia Communications SARL, for their facilitation of a contract for a new company, "Niger Uranium S.A." Ibrahim Hamidou publically has admitted that the document is legitimate, but denies receiving any money. After being questioned and accused of defamation, six of the eight journalists were released without formal charges after several hours.

Two Journalists Still in Police Custody

¶3. Two of the journalists, Abdoulaye Tiemogo (Le Canard Dechaine) and Ali Soumana (Le Courier) are still in detention at the main police station in Niamey pending official charges from the office of the General Prosecutor, expected late on August 5 or on August 6. In addition to questioning on the corruption charges levied against the President's son, officials accused Tiemogo of libel for a report published by his "Le Canard Dechaine" implicating the Minister of Justice Garba Lompo in the embezzlement of 220 million CFA

(approximately 473 thousand US dollars), meant for a study on slavery in Niger, while he served as the president of the National Commission for Human Rights and Fundamental Liberties (CNDLF). (Note: Current exchange rate is 465 FCFA = 1 USD. End note.) Officials are detaining Ali Soumana of Le Courier in connection with a report he filed that claimed that the CNDLF misused 350 million CFA (approximately 753 thousand USD) allocated for oversight of the August 4 constitutional referendum.

Dounia Again in the Middle

¶4. The police also questioned Tiemogo regarding a statement he made on independent Dounia TV on July 31, that the new international arrest warrant for former prime minister Hama Amadou (ref A) on charges of "illicit enrichment" and money laundering were politically motivated and false. The police have accused him of "discrediting the Ministry of Justice." Following this interview, the police hauled in the editor of Dounia TV Seyni Amadou and the director of Dounia Radio Mahirou Amadou for a round of questioning on the morning of August 5, before being released. (Note: This is the latest attempt by the GON to hold Dounia accountable for statements made by opposition leaders on its programs (refs B and C). End note.)

Local, Int'l Media Organizations Denounce Police Actions

¶5. A statement signed by ten independent media organizations, released on August 2, lambasted government and police attempts to block investigations of corruption and prevent anti-referendum voices from being heard. In addition to stating their concerns over the questioning and detention of journalists, the communique also alleged that the Deputy Director of Dounia Media Group was reproached by the President of the High Council for Communications (CSC), recently granted nearly unlimited regulatory authority (ref D), for broadcasting the statements of opposition leaders who

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intended to prevent the holding of the referendum. Furthermore, the Minister of Interior is said in the statement to have told a Dounia journalist that it was forbidden to report on citizens who planned to abstain from voting in the August 4 referendum. The Africa Program Coordinator of the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) said, "The detention of Abdoulaye Tiemogo and Ali Soumana is part of a disturbing trend of harassment of independent journalists reporting on corruption in Niger."

Comment

¶6. The official warnings and police interrogations were likely an attempt to harass and intimidate the local media on the eve of the referendum into squelching opposition voices at a crucial moment. Independent media coverage of the referendum day was slightly more subdued than reporting during the campaign, and it is likely that the government's last-minute shot across the bow, combined with a visibly enhanced military and police presence in Niamey and the implicit threat of summary, unilateral suspension by the newly-enhanced CSC President, led to a modest increase in self-censorship. Nevertheless, a majority of independent media actors remain publically committed to defending the principle of the freedom of the press in Niger. End comment.

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